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*Political Developments and Prospects
in South Vietnam*

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND PROSPECTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

Summary

Although the military establishment has a virtual monopoly on the levers of real power in South Vietnam, it has shown a steadily increasing degree of political wisdom and sophistication since assuming political control in May 1965. The military government has successfully coped with the kinds of crises that toppled its predecessors, and has taken South Vietnam a significant way down the road toward constitutional government. Though South Vietnamese politics are still marked by stress, fragmentation, and potential discord, the last two years have witnessed a notable improvement in political stability and the initiation of a process at the Saigon level which holds promise of leading to the evolution of the kind of national political institutions which are needed to make South Vietnam a viable modern state.

For over a year, the military establishment has been quietly exploring ways of creating a political apparatus capable of ensuring continued military domination within a constitutional and representative system (though no such apparatus has yet been built or is likely to be constructed before the elections). This effort has been carried on primarily by Marshal Ky (and his immediate associates), who has made overtures to and developed some measure of support among a wide range of civilian groups.

Political thinking, within the military however, has been premised on the assumption that there would be only one military candidate in the forthcoming elections, a candidate to which the military establishment could give unified support. This assumption, in turn, has been based on the recognition that military unity and cohesion is essential to continued political progress and stability, for the generals are well aware that the prime contributor to the political achievements of the past two years has been the unity displayed (so far) by the military establishment. This unity

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is now threatened -- though not yet jeopardized -- by the sharpening rivalry between Ky and General Thieu. Ky has formally announced himself a candidate for the presidency and Thieu has indicated that he also plans to run.

The civilian political opposition to the military establishment is fragmented and almost certainly could not develop the kind of organized effort that would be necessary to defeat a candidate with undivided military backing. If Ky were the only military candidate, his chances for winning a comfortable plurality would be considerably better than even. If Thieu actually runs, prognosis will be uncertain until we can see the actual effect of Thieu's candidacy on unified military support of Ky.

The strongest of the civilian candidates is Tran Van Huong, who is almost certain to run. As a southerner and a staunch advocate of southern causes, Huong would draw heavy support from this area. While he gives lip service to the need for military-civilian cooperation, compromise with the military, would be difficult for Huong as president. The chairman of the Constituent Assembly, Phan Khac Suu, may also run, but is unlikely to gain significant support outside the southern area.

In casting about for issues, civilian candidates are certain to raise the themes of corruption, peace and foreign (i.e., US) domination. The militant (Tri Quang) Buddhists have already launched at least a trial run of an anti-war, anti-US campaign. The injection of such themes into the electoral campaign will receive wide play in the international press but we doubt if they will become (or that the GVN will let them become) burning, divisive issues in Vietnam. Though the US has some vocal and highly articulate critics among the Vietnamese intelligentsia, and though the sheer magnitude of the US presence in Vietnam makes some friction and resentment inevitable, by and large the US is well regarded by politically conscious Vietnamese, most of whom are grateful for American support

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and recognize that without it, South Vietnam could not survive as an independent political entity.

Similarly, though many Vietnamese are understandably tired of strife, there is widespread acceptance of the fact that the only alternative to continued struggle is the unacceptable one of Communist domination. The GVN is not likely to allow much discussion of reconciliation or rapprochement with the NLF during the forthcoming campaign, but here it will be running with, not against, the prevailing climate of non-Communist opinion since the NLF's claims to potential independence of view and indigenous political roots are given much less credence within Vietnam than they are given abroad.

Over the past two years the trends in South Vietnamese political life have been favorable and encouraging, but the unity and stability achieved, though significant, is fragile. Over the weeks ahead there will be real and constant risks that electoral ambitions and stresses will inject divisive strains sufficient to destroy this stability and arrest the progress achieved to date, particularly if the Thieu-Ky rivalry splits the unity of the military establishment. There will also be the risk that Ky or his associates (e.g., General Loan) will succumb to temptation and try to rig the election in a politically disastrous manner. Predictions, thus, cannot be offered with confidence. It remains the case, however, that South Vietnam's record of political achievement has been impressive, that in the process now in train there are signs of genuine political development, and that events, so far, are moving in the right direction.

The Setting

1. Since its independence in 1954, South Vietnam has been in the throes of political evolution, the course of which has been erratic and often convulsive. In particular, the pace of political activity quickened following the overthrow of the Diem regime, although such activity often occurred in extra-legal channels more than in legal ones. Under the present military regime, however, politics have tended to shift from the streets and back rooms toward more conventional political modes and forums. To have come this far is no mean achievement, given the country's political history, and represents more progress than anyone expected when the military assumed control in June 1965.

2. But the crucial question is, what happens next? South Vietnam has poor clay with which to build a national political structure. Endemic political fragmentation is still the rule, and politics tend to be dominated by narrow-based, usually contentious, factions reflecting regional, religious, or simply personal loyalties with little consideration for broader national interest. Not only is there nothing resembling a national party, but even the political fragments are badly splintered. Thus, the upcoming presidential and legislative elections will test the ability of the Vietnamese to form a government that is both reasonably effective and relatively representative; that is, a government that reflects, and is cognizant of, the necessity for balancing personal liberty and national order. There can be no assurance that this goal will be realized; the attempt itself might once again plunge the country into political paroxysms.

3. In any event, the divisive nature of Vietnamese politics will have to be attenuated, and eventually subsumed, by a broader political framework if continued political progress is to be realized. Although broadly based political groupings are not an early prospect, there are encouraging indications that the elections are stimulating cooperation among diverse political factions. This is of great significance for Vietnam and for the US

because, if handled well, this process could cause political life in South Vietnam to move in the general direction of stability and order. The following paragraphs will assess the factors and forces now influential in South Vietnamese political life.

The Military Establishment

Composition, Attitudes and Loyalties

4. Since assuming open control of the government in May 1965, the military establishment has displayed a remarkable degree of cohesion. This cohesion derives in large measure from the similar backgrounds of the senior officers--regional, religious, military, educational and experience--and their fairly acute awareness and understanding of the political realities in Vietnam. As a result, there is at least some willingness to subordinate personal ambitions to the collective interests of the military and an apparent consensus among the military hierarchy concerning the major policy issues facing Vietnam. In light of the past performance of South Vietnam's civilian politicians, the military has no confidence in the ability of the civilians to administer effectively, to maintain national cohesion, to pursue the war vigorously, or to refrain from interference in professional military matters. The military leaders share a common aspiration for political stability, but they interpret this as requiring military dominance in any government in the near future.

5. The military leadership has faced many thorny issues, but the most serious potential threat to the cohesion of the Directorate since its inception two years ago has come from within, on the issue of which of its two principal leaders would become the military candidate in the presidential elections. Early on, General Thieu seized the initiative by saying that while he thought that he would be a candidate, he would defer the public announcement of his decision while he reflected on his chances for success. This position evoked from General Ky a promise of support if, in fact, Thieu chose to run. But as months rolled by and Thieu continued to

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vacillate, Ky who quite obviously wished to run and saw his chances as infinitely better than those of his senior colleague, became highly restive.

16. Since the two men were apparently unable to resolve the problem face-to-face, Ky began to exert pressure on the other members of the Directorate to choose between the two by vote. Having reached the top by not having made many bad guesses in the Saigon arena of internal military politics, the senior generals were understandably chary of making such a selection, even by secret ballot. Both contenders launched a variety of stratagems and ploys to see the issue finally resolved. Suspicions and divided loyalties among the other Directorate members were major by-products of this prolonged infighting. The 8 May announcement by the Minister of Defense, General Vien, that the armed forces would not put forth, as such, a military candidate, broke the impasse. In this statement, Ky saw absolution from his pledge of support to Thieu, enabling him to announce his candidacy at once.

7. If the weight of Ky's confident bid for power is sufficient to convince the indecisive General Thieu that he should abandon all thoughts of his own candidacy, the prognosis for unanimity among the high command is good. Ky and his closest supporters should be able to paper over the problems in the Directorate that the delay has caused, and a closing of ranks in support of Ky can be expected. If Thieu also chooses to run, however, the dilemma that has so far been fairly well contained within the Directorate itself will be extended throughout the ranks of the entire officer corps. Such a move on Thieu's part could have divisive effects throughout the country. Corps, provinces and districts are almost exclusively administered by military officers. The power of these officials, which was admirably used in last September's Constituent Assembly elections simply to get out the vote, may well be abused in the presidential elections in support of the military candidate whom they feel deserves their loyalty. Within ARVN proper, down to the platoon level, military commanders will be hard pressed to decide how they should counsel their

troops to vote. This conundrum cannot help but distract the military and adversely affect the vigor with which the war is prosecuted during the months of the campaign.

8. Though remote, the possibility exists that General Thieu, who has stated that the military establishment ought to withdraw from politics, may decide to ally himself with a civilian running mate and campaign on a platform which advocates the return of power to civilian hands. This would have obvious appeal to the large civil element who might see in Thieu's candidacy an opportunity to reduce sharply the chances of front runner Ky. But inherently Thieu has minimal voter appeal, and no extra-military organizational base of national scope. Moreover, the Army, spearheaded by the "baby Turks," would see in Thieu's move a betrayal and a threat to the destiny to forge the nation which they believe is theirs. These predominantly northern and pro-Ky officers would be able to dilute the army loyalty Thieu might be counting on. The effect would still be divisive, of course, but much less so than if Thieu chose to run as an avowed military candidate.

Political Strategy and Assets

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10. Loan, who will manage the Ky campaign, feels that it is too late to create the viable political coalition originally planned as a front for the military candidate. With less than four months until election, such a front now would only be window dressing.

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the military establishment has substantial political assets at its disposal. It controls the financial coffers of the country; it is the dispenser of governmental favors, jobs and sinecures; it has the organization, manpower, and trucks to see that the voters get to the polls. In short, the military is the only (non-Communist) body whose power and sway extends throughout the country, and this gives it tremendous advantages in organizing grass roots support. In particular, the Revolutionary Development (RD) program and cadre provide the regime with a potentially formidable political instrument with which to get to the people. The RD teams were used for political purposes to get out the vote for the Constituent Assembly elections last September, and will undoubtedly be even more active in the presidential and legislative contests this fall.

11. In addition to the RD cadre, the military hierarchy can count on the support of most of the armed forces, the civil administrative apparatus, and provincial and district officials (most of whom are military). These groups not only have a vested interest in the present system, but they are susceptible to persuasion and pressure from the government. Thus, as election day approaches, it can be assumed that considerable emphasis will be placed on these groups delivering the vote. Officials whose

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response appears less than enthusiastic will run the risk of being replaced.

Civilian Support

12. In addition to the substantial assets the military has from its own resources, the establishment leaders will probably be at least moderately successful in garnering support for their presidential candidate from a number of the traditional civilian political factions. It is generally accepted in Vietnam that military support is essential for the survival of any government, and many believe that at this time the only way to insure military support is to have a military man in the top executive post. Moreover, the military's support of a faction's legislative ticket could be decisive. Such considerations, plus the fact that most Vietnamese observers believe that the military will win anyway, tend to provide considerable incentive to cooperate with the military and thereby get on the bandwagon and share the rewards and spoils of victory.

13. The military establishment will have to make strong overtures to these groupings, but it must be stressed that endorsement of a candidate by a political faction does not mean that the candidate will receive full support from the faction's adherents. There is such a mishmash of conflicting interests within the many political groups that some seepage is inevitable. Indeed, some groups will attempt to be involved to some extent in each of the contending camps so as to insure their interests no matter how the election comes out.

14. Chief among the military establishment's political targets will be the following groups:

a. The Hoa Hao Sect. In the Delta, the Hoa Hao religious organization, which carries more political weight than the sect's small political parties, appears to favor backing the military's candidate. Such leaders as Van Phu and Le Phuoc Sang, once a special assistant to Ky and now the leader of the Democratic-Alliance Bloc in the Constituent Assembly (CA), probably see more to gain